

Intercultural Sensitivity among Medical Students of UniKL RCMP

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Abstract: Generally the development and spread of technology has helped to minimize the physical borders among people. Knowledge, technology, education and even cultures have been easily transferred across borders through globalization. It is believed that educational institutions provide stable platforms to promote and practice intercultural communication among the younger generation of students. This study aims to examine whether medical students of UniKL RCMP have developed the required level of intercultural sensitivity to develop better intercultural understanding and communication across cultures. The Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory (Penbek, Yurakul & Cerit, 2009) was used to quantify participant's levels of intercultural sensitivity based on Chen and Starosta (2000). Results of this study show that medical students have moderate level of intercultural sensitivity. Formal education/instruction does play an essential role in raising cultural awareness among students.

Keywords: Intercultural Sensitivity; Intercultural Communication; Intercultural Competence

1. Introduction

In the recent years, the Malaysian educational environment has become more intercultural. Malaysia has always been well known throughout the world to be a multi-racial country. With the inflow of foreign students in greater numbers people of various ethnicities can be seen in almost every part of this country. In addition, with the advent of technology and globalization, the world has shrunk and people from countries all over the world have moved to Malaysia for various reasons. Bhawuk & Brislin (1992) claim; "To be effective in another culture, people must be interested in other cultures, be sensitive enough to notice cultural differences, and then also be willing to modify their behaviour as an indication of respect for people of other cultures". Due to this, encountering cultural diversity has become a norm during the course of the day for Malaysians. In order to cope with this phenomenon, the 1Malaysia programme was designed by the Malaysian Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Mohd Najib Bin Tun Haji Abdul Razak on 16 September 2010. The main aim of the programme was to call on government agencies, the cabinet and civil servants to give greater emphasis to create an effective government and to promote racial harmony and national unity.

Besides Malaysians, it is very common to see expatriates, foreign workers force and international students everywhere and it is extremely likely to see diverse examples of art, scripts, films, food and objects representing many cultural backgrounds especially in major urban centres. Many private universities and colleges in Malaysia are now becoming centres of learning for international students from various countries. Though this may seem to benefit the country financially but it also creates some social issues related to Intercultural sensitivity. According to Bhawuk & Brislin (1992), a person's response to cultural diversity and the perspectives of people from various cultures are influenced by Intercultural sensitivity. Many seem to feel that Intercultural understanding is an innate quality and is something that does not need to be instilled in a human being. However several researchers have different perspectives on this issue. As stated by Bennett (1993) in Paige (2001);

“Cross-cultural contact usually has been accompanied by bloodshed, oppression, or genocide. The continuation of this pattern in today’s world of unimagined interdependence is not just immoral or unprofitable — it is self-destructive. It has to be understood that intercultural sensitivity is not a natural process. It is not part of our primate past, nor has it characterized most of human history.”

Hence, intercultural understanding and intercultural sensitivity have become essential elements that everyone needs to especially in the fields of health, education and sports, entertainment, business as they bring people of different cultures into contact.

2. Background

8.1 Intercultural sensitivity

Intercultural sensitivity involves several components. Such as respect for differences, cultural empathy and preservation of harmony and awareness of communication symbols. These elements are able to pinpoint the level of cultural sensitivity present in an individual. Some people hold the generalized perception that individuals who are genuinely exposed to people from different cultures are often more culturally sensitive and able to deal with their differences efficiently. However, a study conducted by Fuller (2007) totally rejects this perception. Fuller claims that intercultural exposure does not play any role in boosting or influencing intercultural sensitivity. In the field of education, Bandura’s Social Learning Theory emphasizes that one’s way of life and intercultural interaction very much influenced by a symbolic environment. However, wrong imitation of the learning process may create inappropriate behaviour and portray one’s intercultural incompetency (Selmer, 2004). In addition, Gudykunst & Nishida (2001) also agree that lack of cultural sensitivity and interest in other cultures usually cause anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural encounters. Malaysian students and people in general must possess cultural sensitivity as it is extremely crucial in avoiding cultural chaos such as racism, stereotyping, ethnocentrism (Graf, 2004; Stahl, 2000), or bias in social popularity (Ones & Viswesvaran, 1999). Likewise as cited in Kawita (2013), Bennet (1993), Chen & Starosta (1998) an individual’s attitude in accommodating, understanding and appreciating cultural differences as well as enhancing one’s self-awareness denotes appropriate and efficient behaviour in situations that require intercultural communication.

Several studies have been conducted to investigate intercultural sensitivity among university students. One such significant study was done by Penbek, Yurdakul & Cerit (2009) in Turkey. The samples consists students from two different universities. Results were collected using the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale by Chen & Starosta (2000) as is being used in this study. The results showed that university students who have been previously exposed to intercultural environments were more open-minded and accommodating towards people from different cultures. There was also a significant relationship between respect and their intercultural interaction. It was concluded that the more respect the samples had for people from different cultures, the more confidently they were in interacting with people from different cultures.

8.2 Intercultural communication

Before the term intercultural sensitivity became familiar, intercultural communication had to be studied. Intercultural communication transpires when a person from one culture interacts with a person from another culture. Contrastingly, intercultural miscommunication happens when the sender’s intended message is not successfully decoded by the individual from the second culture. Misperception, misinterpretation, and misevaluation are often some of the reasons for cross-cultural misunderstandings and conflicts. Therefore, studies and theories on cross-cultural communication provide a base for

exploration in the field of intercultural sensitivity. As stated by Lustig & Koester (1999, pg.60.), the phrase intercultural communication can be broken down into two distinctive terms: 'intercultural' and 'communication'. The relationship between culture and communication is indeed very complex and without any doubt it is clear that culture exerts a strong influence on communication.

'Intercultural' represents the presence of at least two participants of distinct cultures in any environment. Their differences can be in terms of values, orientations, perceptions of social relationships and gender roles in the society. Communication, on the other hand as discussed by Samovar & Porter (1997, pg.9), Hoopes (1979, pg. 29) & Martin & Nakayama (2000, pg. 61) involves verbal and non-verbal language. These forms vary among cultures though there may be some similarities. Intercultural communication occurs when the people involved try to look for similarities between their cultures and exchange information in either form to ensure that the intended message is delivered successfully by attributing meaning to a person's symbols, words or actions. The real meaning of one's culture and customs is communication and only through communication culture is described. (Paige, R.M., 2001).

8.3 Intercultural competence

Lustig & Koester (2009) describe Intercultural Competence as the ability to think, distinguish the differences within different cultural settings and establish competent communication with people from different cultures in multicultural surroundings. Recently in Malaysia, intercultural competence has become a vital need for Malaysians young and old. This is because globalization has left a massive impact on the political, technological, environmental, and economic systems of the globe. As a consequence, this has resulted in the necessity for higher education institutions to prepare undergraduates with the awareness, knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform effectively in the international arena. Liu (2012) suggested that appropriateness and effectiveness shape the fundamental notion of intercultural competence. Both local as well as international students need to attain at least a "minimal level of intercultural competence in order to deal effectively in a culturally diverse society and globalised economy". Besides that they also need to apply these concepts in an appropriate and effective manner. Logically, when one is in an intercultural environment, the distinct cultures of the people involved will influence the selection, classification, layout and perception of the message put forward (Auncion-Lande, 1977).

Additionally, according to Byram and Risager (1999), intercultural competence is important as it will enable students to understand two or more cultures and cultural identities found in the conversation and engage in successful cross-cultural communication. For instance, based on a study by Yum (2012), communication competence from the Korean perspective is not limited to one's capacity to dominate others but instead focuses on the ability to harmonize and cooperate with others. As such, communication competence is achieved when interpersonal relationships become harmonious in that all parties maintain appropriate relationships instead of being driven by personal goals. In the past few years, researchers like Deardoff (2004), Huang, Rayner & Zhang (2003), Alfred Byrem (2002), Taylor (1994) and Chen (1990) have conducted vast researches on the impact and changes in intercultural competence due to the effect of globalization. As mentioned in the earlier parts of the study, high intercultural competence is very important especially to university scholars as it assists in developing one's competence while communicating with people from different cultures as well as promoting healthy ways in dealing with complicating conflicts (Huang.et.al, 2003). Basically, in order to communicate effectively in a cross-cultural background, one must have intercultural communication and communicative competence. The reason for this is, communicative competence will help in conveying the desired response.

3. Objective

Training and education play a vital part in the development of an individual's intercultural sensitivity (Paige, 1993; Pruegger & Rogers, 1994). To further illustrate this situation, Malaysia has been a multiracial nation long before independence was achieved and racial harmony and intercultural understanding had never been a major problem. However, only recently, issues on intercultural sensitivity and cross-cultural misunderstanding are always being discussed negatively in the media. The rapid development of technology also plays an essential role in aggravating these problems. In order to educate students and promote the 1Malaysia concept among tertiary students, the Ministry of Higher Education and the Malaysian Qualification Association (MQA) have instructed for private colleges to offer a subject called Intercultural Communication. For the past two years, medical students at UniKL RCMP have received instruction on this elective subject (WEB 11203).

The researchers noticed that a large number of students had negative feelings and attitudes towards the subject. Majority of the students also felt that this subject was unnecessary for medical students and would not be of benefit to them. Moreover, this subject will no longer be offered as an elective in higher education institutes anymore. This tends to support the negative views towards this subject. A plethora of researches on communication competence, intercultural competence, and intercultural sensitivity have thus far focused on the business, education field and management students. Nevertheless, there has not been any research conducted on intercultural sensitivity among medical students of higher education institutes particularly in Malaysia. This research intends to fulfil this gap.

The main objective of this study is to assess Intercultural sensitivity levels of medical undergraduates. This is mainly because learning about our own culture and others, is a primary step towards becoming effective at tackling diversity that is encountered on a daily basis. Additionally, increased education and experience with people from other cultural backgrounds can lead to increased sophistication and better performance at one's job.

The objectives of the study are included in the following statements:

- i. To test the whole sample to identify UniKL medical students' level of intercultural sensitivity using the intercultural sensitivity scale.
- ii. To test the whole sample to interpret whether formal education is needed to develop better intercultural communication across nations.

4. Significance of the Study

The skill to deal and negotiate effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds is an important skill regardless whether it is in the workplace, at the market, at school or casual interaction with foreigners. This study on intercultural sensitivity provides beneficial information on the effectiveness of the Intercultural Communication subject which is a prerequisite to be taken by undergraduates and its impact on the mentality of university undergraduates. Moreover, the researchers believe that the findings of this study will contribute excessively towards the education field in Malaysia. This study will clearly show if Malaysian undergraduates can openly accept the beliefs and values of people from other cultures. Particularly, for the samples because as future medical personnels they will need to be patient and culturally sensitive while treating patients of all races. This value must be instilled during their training sessions and lessons. Furthermore, the researchers also feel that this study provides many advantages to academicians and fellow educators especially in highlighting the importance of implementing knowledge of other culture and traditions around the world into their lessons. This will provide other students and the younger generation in whole the valuable opportunity to understand, accept and appreciate other cultures.

In addition, this study will benefit the university especially in terms of organizing students' programmes and orientation activities which may include knowledge and traditions of the Malaysian culture. Results of this study will contribute widely to curriculum development of higher learning institutions and also in primary and secondary school curriculum in future. Education policies can also be improved with several components discussed in this study. For instance; the education ministry can reconsider the appointment of foreign teachers into the education sector. Finally, the intended study is in line with the 1 Malaysia concept that is being carried out by the government. This descriptive study will prove if undergraduates have a positive attitude towards the 1 Malaysia concept as well as accepting other cultures outside Malaysia.

5. Research Questions

- i. What is the level of intercultural sensitivity among medical students of UniKL RCMP?
- ii. What is the importance/ significance of formal instruction in intercultural communication?

6. Definition of terms

Throughout this study, several terms and phrases were frequently used in explaining the study and its findings. This section provides the definitions of those terms to ease the comprehension of readers.

- i. Culture: "Patterns of educated attitudes, behaviour, beliefs and perception that are shared by a group of people." (Martin, 1994, p. 10).
- ii. Intercultural Communication : How people from different countries, ethnics, religious, social & educational backgrounds act, communicate and perceive the world around them.
- iii. Intercultural Sensitivity : the ability to discriminate and experience relevant cultural differences (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman, 2003)
"Sensitivity to the significance of cultural diversity and the points of view of people of other cultures" (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992, p. 414).

7. Methodology

7.1 Questionnaire development

A questionnaire has been developed in order to measure the medical students' level of intercultural sensitivity and the significance of formal education in intercultural communication. The questionnaire was adopted and adapted from the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale by Chen and Starosta (2000) and Reungthai.K (2012). The original questionnaire consisted 24 items. The researchers decided to add five questions in order to collect data that will be helpful for the analysis of the study. It has two different parts composed in English since knowing a foreign language is among the key factors of an effective intercultural communication. The first part consists demographic data of the respondents. The samples age, gender and ethnicity were asked. The second part covers 25 statements on intercultural sensitivity and 5 statements on necessity to have formal education on a 5-point scale where 1 =strongly disagree, 5 =strongly agree. The intercultural sensitivity scale developed by Chen and Starosta (2000) is used in the questionnaire which measure the intercultural sensitivity level of respondents with 25 question grouped under 5 major factors as follows:

- i. Interaction Engagement (question 2, 15, 18, 26, 27 and 28)
- ii. Respect for Cultural Differences (question 3, 9, 10, 21, 23 and 25)
- iii. Interaction Confidence (question 5, 6, 7, 8 and 13)

- iv. Interaction Enjoyment (question 11, 16, 20 and 29)
- v. Interaction Attentiveness (question 19, 22 and 24)

7.2 Sample

The target population was UniKL RCMP medical student. These students are taking the Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery degree at the university. This is a 5 year programme. As mentioned earlier, the undergraduates are required to complete the Intercultural Communication subject in their second year of studies. The total number of students in the target population is 503. However, only 139 students were selected as the samples of the study (N=139). The purposive technique was used when selecting the participants for the study based on two major elements. Firstly, these students either have taken the ICC subject or are taking it currently. Besides that, the students selected as participants are mostly second year students and do not have sufficient experience in higher education institutes compared to their counterparts. Most of the senior students are rarely at the campus as they are undergoing practical sessions at government hospitals. This is why the samples were limited to Year 2 and Year 3 students.

7.3 Data Analysis Procedures

Data was collected on the 1st of December 2014 at UniKL RCMP Ipoh. A consent form was attached to each questionnaire to ensure that respondents were not forced to answer the questionnaire and to guarantee that respondent's details and information obtained will be strictly confidential. Each participant who agreed to be part of the study proceeded to answer all the 30 items. 139 sets of questionnaire were distributed and all the 139 sets were returned. No sets were missing. Moreover, all questionnaires were completely answers. No items were left unanswered. There the N value (respondents) remains at 139.

The data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science Program (SPSS) Version 11. The researchers presented the data via descriptive statistics: mean and frequency. Information in Part 1, the samples personal information were represented using frequency and percentage. On the other hand, the respondent's intercultural sensitivity in part 2 was represented by their mean scores. Paige et.al (2003) mean of the standard rating scale of intercultural sensitivity was adapted by the researchers in looking for the mean for each of the factors mentioned earlier. The following scale was used to interpret the mean scores:

- i. 1.00 – 1.50 = very low
- ii. 1.51 – 2.50 = low
- iii. 2.51 – 3.50 = moderate,
- iv. 3.51 – 4.50 = high
- v. 4.51 – 5.00 = very high.

8. Findings

Table 1: Demographic information

Profile	Category	Frequency (N=139)	Percentage (%)
Age	18-20 years old	114	82
	21-23 years old	24	17.3
	24-25 years old	1	0.7
Gender	Male	37	26.6
	Female	102	73.4

Table 1 displays demographic information of the participants involved in the study. The largest age group which is 82% of the participant are aged between 18 and 20 years. The percentage of female participants (73.4%) is higher than that of male participants (26.6%)

Table 2: summary scores for the five factors of intercultural sensitivity.

Factor	Mean	Level of Intercultural Sensitivity
Interaction Engagement	3.70	High
Interaction Attentiveness	3.69	High
Interaction Confidence	3.37	Moderate
Respect for Cultural Differences	2.83	Moderate
Interaction Enjoyment	2.53	Moderate

Table 2 presents the mean scores recorded for the five factors of intercultural sensitivity measurement. Interaction Engagement (3.70) is the most preferred intercultural communication factor among MBBS students. It is followed by Interaction Attentiveness (3.69), Interaction Confidence (3.37). The fourth factor is Respect for Cultural Differences (2.83) and Interaction Enjoyment (2.53) scores the lowest mean among the communication factors. The values of the means were interpreted according to the following scale 1.00-1.50=*very low*; 1.51-2.50 = *low*; 2.51-3.50= *moderate*; 3.51-4.50= *high*; 4.51-5.00=*very high* (Paige et al, 2003).

Table 3: Necessity to learn intercultural sensitivity

	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neither disagree or agree	4 Agree	5 Strongly agree
1 Intercultural classes are necessary for medical students	10.8%	11.5%	31.7%	33.1%	12.9%
2 Medical field would provide opportunity to understand other cultures	0.7%	4.3%	10.1%	55.4%	29.5%
3 I look forward to work with people from other cultures	0%	2.2%	20.9%	56.8%	20.1%
4 The necessity to learn intercultural sensitivity in formal classes	8.6%	14.4%	21.6%	41.7%	12.9%
5 Intercultural communication should be offered to medical students	8.6%	10.1%	36.0%	24.5%	20.9%

Table 3 shows the need to learn intercultural sensitivity in formal classes. 33.1% of participants agreed that intercultural classes are necessary for medical students. 55.4% agreed that medical field would provide the opportunity to understand other cultures. 56.8% agreed that they look forward to work with people from other cultures. 41.7% agreed on the necessity to learn intercultural sensitivity in formal classes. However 36% were undecided when asked whether intercultural communication should be offered to medical students.

8. Discussion

1. *Level of intercultural sensitivity*

Being open-minded and willing to communicate with people from different cultures is believed to be the main factor for Interaction Engagement which has emerged as the number one factor for intercultural sensitivity. This seems to agree with Hou (2010) who in his research concluded that interaction engagement is the strongest factor for intercultural sensitivity. The high level of interaction attentiveness is closely related to respondents' efforts to understand the process of intercultural communication. In addition to that, respondents who are medical students have sufficient level of intercultural sensitivity prior to the classes of intercultural communication taken by the students due to the continuous exposure to subjects like Moral Education and co-curriculum since primary and secondary levels. The level of education plays an important role in developing their intercultural sensitivity. The Intercultural Communication course explores and discusses the uniqueness of other cultures compared to their own culture. The assessments incorporated into the subject also provide vast opportunities for the students to do their own library and internet research and in the process learn and understand the salient elements of other cultures especially those which they have never heard of before. This has definitely increased their level of cultural sensitivity in general.

Interaction confidence is closely related to anxiety when facing and dealing with people from other cultures. Majority of the respondents seem to disagree with the statement 'I find it very hard to talk to people from different cultures'. This probably is an indication of their confidence in interacting with people from different cultures. This is further strengthened by the support for statement No.5, 'I am pretty sure of myself in interacting with people from different cultures' which gets a score of 59.7%, which is quite impressive. However 53.2% of the respondents seem to be unsure if they 'know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures' (item 7). This is rather confusing as they have given an emphatic Yes to statement 5. So it is rather difficult to come to a conclusion as whether this group of respondents do actually have the Interaction confidence in them.

The findings suggests moderate level of intercultural sensitivity which means to say that there is a minute level of ethnocentrism among medical students. Respect for cultural differences includes tolerance towards other cultures and at the same time self-acceptance of one's own culture. The level of respect for cultural differences is only moderate.

Interaction enjoyment is elicited by the statements, 'I often feel useless when interacting with people from different cultures', 'I often get discouraged when I am with people from different cultures'. Enjoyment of interaction includes positive and negative reactions towards intercultural communication. Individual's attitude in accommodating, understanding and appreciating cultural differences as well as enhancing one's self-awareness denotes appropriate and efficient behaviour in situations that require intercultural communication (Kawita, 2013).

2. *The need to develop better intercultural communication across nations/cultures.*

Formal education is required in order for an individual to develop better understanding of intercultural communication. Teaching and learning is believed to be shaped through acculturation and different cultural backgrounds (Teekens, 2011). Most of the respondents agreed on having formal classes in order to understand and appreciate intercultural sensitivity. They also agree quite ardently (55.4%) that the medical field provides a platform for medical professionals to explore other cultures and deal with patients from various backgrounds.

Having a structured formal education system which focuses on intercultural sensitivity might help medical professionals in their working environment in the future. Readiness to face the working world and eliminating ethnocentrism will definitely be helpful for them when they face the real world out there. Diversity in curriculum is needed to bridge the gap between curriculum and society. Formal education is able to affect the education system in several ways. According to Hager (2010), intercultural sensitivity will be able to transform the administration, curriculum as well as intergroup contact. In terms of administration, it would call for the employment and acceptance of intercultural workforce. Moreover, it will also strengthen the validity and reliability of in the choice of assessments regardless of the students' age group. In addition, the nature of the medical faculty itself promotes medical practitioners to contribute to the society. Likewise, stronger intercultural sensitivity in formal education will form a bridge between medical officers (in this case the respondents) and the society.

9. Conclusion

All in all, the findings of the study has clearly demonstrated that with formal instruction, the students have become more sensitive and be aware of cultural differences. Thus they are in a better position to appreciate and acknowledge these differences. With higher levels of intercultural sensitivity, students will be more understanding towards other cultures and cultural differences that exist between people

10. Recommendations

In order to promote further studies in this field, the researchers have made several recommendations. Firstly, this research expresses a need for formal instruction in cultural differences so future generations will be more accepting towards these differences which will generate better understanding between people of other cultures. Secondly, formal education with regards to intercultural understanding needs to be started earlier than in tertiary levels to inculcate higher level of intercultural appreciation. Moreover, further research in this area in the Malaysian context is required for comparisons to be made. Besides that, respondents' cultural experiences can also be a solid topic to be studied. Finally, the researchers believe that conducting this study on a different set of respondents will indicate significant differences in the findings of the study thus providing a higher level of analysis on intercultural sensitivity in the Malaysian platform.

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